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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that conflict, change, and deviance in school board behavior can be effectively studied and examined within generalized models of culture. In the first section, problems in studying educational cultures are identified and the biased views of educational anthropologists are discussed. Section II presents information on role and myth in the politics of education and discusses differences in interpretation of an institution which arise with different observers. Section III focuses on relationships between culture, conflict, and school boards. Three basic premises underlie successful use of a general conflict model to explain school boards and their operation: (1) that there exists a worldwide culture of education; (2) that the United States has a national culture of education; and (3) that the school board can be considered a unique culture. Categories for understanding culture and conflict within an educational institution are identified in section IV, including individual motives of school board members, changing expectations of society, and balance between the processes of cultural stability and change. Section V presents a brief summary of the paper. References are included in the document. (Author/DB)

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CULTURES AND CONFLICT IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Presented at AERA
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by
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Problems in Studying Educational Cultures

Anthropologists have reached a curious spot in history. No longer exclusively "in her majesty's service," anthropologists can be found in every nation of the world. Each nation seems well supplied with anthropologists, armed with the objectivity that participant observation furnishes them. Each national university lectures young neophytes on the serious dangers of the field research and "going native." Although nations, tribes, and organizational units may be studied ethnographically, their political beliefs may not be conducive toward furthering open field research, understanding, and sometimes even economic development.

Although no longer in her majesty's service, anthropologists hungry for grants-in-aid and travel funds find, all too often, their "pure research" has certain economic restrictions, governmental imperatives, developmental needs and other such "bug-a-boos." There are innoculations, language barriers, visas and other red tape to wade through, to say nothing of the age old territorial imperative held by many groups, keeping the intruder/stranger too busy to really see what is happening or even keeping researchers out at all costs. For such reasons many present anthropologists decide to look elsewhere for field data.

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As grants to study exotic cultures become more difficult to procure,

many social-minded anthropologists began to express their concern for the state of their own country and culture. After all, many said, why go off to the exotic, when plenty of institutions need researching here at home. So at the dissertation stage, doctoral candidates were released from the difficult task of procuring funds for travel if a study could be tailored to a topic "at home." Obviously the Pacific/Oceania, Asian or African major was still out of luck.

For those who could label themselves as urban or educational anthropologists, the cities and schools of America offered virgin territory for ethnography. Since human beings suffer from the same syndromes of those they would study, most of these anthropologists were curiously ethnocentric, if not even a bit narrowminded. Most of these "straight" anthropologists had limited actual experience in schools. The urban types produced some of the very worst in extremism in social viewpoints. Moynihan's (1963) study of the black family reflects that type of report.

Few anthropologists discuss the school as part of a school district. There are exceptions, most notably Wolcott (1973). The notion that a school board is a culture unto itself, though part of a general society, is one that is generally strange to them (Lutz, 1975). For all the admonitions about cultural bias, most anthropologists cannot help, at this point in time, to hold intellectually restrictive views of schools. They are limited by training, lack of interest and/or knowledge of the educational bureaucracy that exists, and general unwillingness to accept educators who "do" educational anthropology. This lack of acceptance is at least partially explained in the preceding description of the inadequacies often plaguing the educator-anthropologist.

In similar fashion, "ways of behavior" are as prescribed and codified for the school board member as they are for the village council in the South Pacific. Sacred myth and ritual exist in every realm of the educational system. Such problems are not limited to the neophyte teachers, but, in fact, probably increase as one moves up the scale of the educational hierarchy. As Harwood (1976, p. 785) states for another society, "Myths stand behind the social order as charters, and give to social institutions an aura of rightness. That is to say, myths codify and sanction a set of activities, a set which Malinowski terms an institution."

The main point in the above is that, without examining the expressed structure (the one visible and accessible) against the deeper structure (which may be neither readily accessible nor viewable) there is very little hope for either educator-anthropologist or anthropologist of education to understand or comprehend the educational structure. Both types of researchers, unaware of their limitations, not only view each other as "odd" or exotic, but often fail to grasp the meaning of the realities as well as the myths of educational bureaucracies. It is dangerous to carry the view of the school board as "exotic" too far. It is equally dangerous to become so immersed in the educational club that one can barely perceive school systems, let alone the rest of the world, which also has cultures which provide for education in some way.

The Function of Role and Myth in Conflict

So far this paper has been devoted to explaining how different researchers view education and the process that led them to their particular bias. An examination of the notion of the myth as it operates in the school system has also been discussed. It is extremely important to understand

who is observing and perceiving, and some notion about why they see it the way they do is almost as important as what they see. Context, therefore, must never be forgotten by the ethnographer, thus providing some focus for the research. Harwood (1976, p. 786) speaks of the axis of space and time as possible demarcations between myths. All institutions need myths to survive. "Given that each mythical charter is tied to an institution and that it is myth itself which serves (at least in part) to demarcate the boundaries between one institution and another, the puzzle arises as to the means by which the myths are kept separate so as to prevent the boundaries of the myths from blurring, and to keep myths from running together and coalescing."

Just as what the observer (researcher) sees, and his/her myth absorption is limited by training and viewpoint, the society's or educational bureaucracy's view of the researcher, is similarly limited by their current viewpoint or myth system. Such ideological gaps often express themselves in myths involving stereotypes such as school board members are influential and hold property, or school board members dislike collective bargaining. Ideological gaps account for much of the cultural conflict among the members of an educational system.

More prevalent and more difficult to ascertain is the nature of conflict, change and deviance within the educational system. The educational system and the role of individuals, within groups and among groups, is perhaps best noted by the dissonance exhibited in perception, viewpoint, and mythical representation. Just as Raven, a creature of socio-religious invention among many native North American groups, represents a range of "meaning," from prankster to an all-consuming, destructive figure (exemplifying many conflicts found within that culture) the role of superintendent is viewed within a range of

meaning from culture-hero, to fall-guy/flunky (a Source of all Error). The latter meaning is often expressed through the process of school board member incumbent defeat and superintendent turnover. Who views whom and the way that is explained serves as the focus of much of the politics of education.

Culture, Conflict and School Boards

Anthropologists often divide culture and conflict into more easily viewed institutions within the culture and the change and deviance exhibited within them. In essence the old "we-they" idea is self-evident and not very useful in explaining how members within a culture view others and themselves and why. The ability to use contrasting general cultural models of conflict to understand and explain school boards and their operation rests on three basic premises: (a) that there is a culture of education, worldwide, with some generally recognizable "universal" categories; (b) that in the United States there is a national culture of education, depending upon and interacting with the larger socio-economic-political structure, itself a recognizable facet, and, therefore, representative of that larger culture; and, (c) the school board can be considered a unique culture. Sub-culture is probably a more correct term for a school board except for the fact that, like the cells of a body, though dependent on the entire and larger physical body, all sub-systems of one type act as a complete unit and have a recognizable type, function, and characteristic behavior so that they can be referred to as an entity. It facilitates examinations of school boards to call them a culture.

Gluckman (1968) states the criteria for transferring paradigms are that they: (1) duplicate the defined type; (2) can be applied to societies

of different types; (3) express a hypothesis which can be tested on a new range of facts. Thus, Gluckman finds one can test the kingship/rebellion model in the Zulu/Shaka assassination syndrome with equally predictable results because his original principles were logically consistent and corrected with other sets of principles (such as cross validation in field methods). Additionally, logical deductions can be made from these relations to give others another method and can be made against observable facts.

Therefore, how many cultures handle conflict should serve as an available set of models of how school boards handle conflict and, more importantly, how the larger educational system and society handle conflict in the educational system, and how the society "handles" school boards that reach a functionally disruptive point.

Culture is "a cognitive map, representing the categories, plans, and rules people use to interpret their world and act purposefully within it." (Spradley and McCurdy, 1974, p.). While "culture is not behavior itself," it is the "underlying rules," a kind of "grammar used to construct and interpret behavior" (Ibid.). Culture is the structural underpinning of society. Because of its immense importance to the society of mankind, whom it serves and yet is invented for and by, it is easy to see how the anthropologist Leslie White saw culture as Super-organic (White, 1963). Carried to the extreme, however, the notion of culture as a super-organic determinant of behavior is dangerous. As Harris sees it (1968, p. 298), "If culture determines how we behave, then what difference is there between a democratic and totalitarian regime other than the illusion to which the actors in the democratic milieu have been enculturated that they are "freer" to choose their individual and collective destinies?"

How each person views culture and his "place" within it, largely determines his/her actions within it, as well as his/her reactions to it. Culture, conflict, change and deviances are integrally related to how groups perceive their position in the larger society. Myths, whether of a religious or social-political nature, serve to reinforce and "shape" perceptions. Neither individuals nor groups have to call culture by its name to recognize its pervasive presence. Whether a group calls a counter force "they," "The Government," "The Church," "Our Society," "Folks," "Tax-payers," they are referring to culture, or aspects of it, or perhaps members of such groups within that culture. The deterministic view of culture as super-organic is less useful than it is rather one-sided. It ignores the general systems approach that more closely resembles the workings of nature as we know it. People "make" culture and interact within the rules and structure of the culture they "made."

A sub-culture within the larger culture can invent a culture for itself that, in time, is non-responsive and no longer tolerated by its larger culture. School boards often act in such a fashion, becoming masters of the "if and the but." Should they invent too many such excuses and not respond sufficiently to the demands of their constituents, they will lose power, and individual members may lose their seats on the board. In discussing this tendency it is necessary to understand the ways a culture views itself and how these views are elaborated within a framework of conflict, change, and deviance.

Categories for Understanding Culture and Conflict

Le Vine (1973) discusses such concerns in his book, Culture, Behavior and Personality. He notes that McClelland (1961) treated ". . . the economy

as a 'projective system' rather than a 'maintenance system.' Economic growth reflects 'entrepreneurial activity' that in turn reflects the frequency in the population of individuals high in achievement motivation." Through socially structured opportunities, Le Vine notes ". . . the motives of aggregates of individuals in a population can affect the operations of a national economy and thereby accelerate or retard its growth." (Ibid, p. 87). In such a way economics cannot be ignored in models of school board behavior since school boards are an aggregate of individuals who act as one. If schools are becoming more like big business in terms of fiscal budgets and responsibilities, economic indicators then quite clearly provide a projection of the institution locally as well as within the overall national picture.

Further, Le Vine points out that Lasswell (1930) presented similar arguments for roles in political institutions while Levinson (1959) focused on bureaucratic roles. "Political and bureaucratic roles do not simply prescribe behavior but also provide a public vehicle for the satisfaction of private motives." (Levine, op. cit., p. 87). Spiro (1961a), Le Vine continues, developed a general model for role behavior which included ". . . behavior in economic and political roles as a response to inner needs as well as societal demands." (Le Vine, op. cit.). Thus, political, social and economic variables are part of the cultural mix of a culture.

The classification of school boards in terms of individual motives may best be described on a pressure-response continuum: "Once a collective activity is institutionalized, it cannot be responsive to or reflective of individual motives in any simple way. The institutional behavior of individuals is always an amalgam of their response to the pressure of established

norms and their exploitation of the available opportunities for satisfaction of personal motives." (Ibid.). There is little margin for the consideration by school personnel, from school boards to teachers, as members of an institutional bureaucracy, to the demands of the individual.

The roles of school board members are probably more vulnerable in terms of public censure than are the roles of teachers or principals with tenure. While teachers and principals are paid with tax dollars, the public is never so easily aroused as when the school board raises taxes through a millage increase. Such godlike powers tend to stimulate high interest and concern in the general populace. The school board usually cites current raises in teacher salaries as the cause of the increase. Such measures and counter-measures place the educational constituencies of the cultural system at odds with each other.

Le Vine thinks it is useful to ". . . think of all institutions as environments that limit the range of options available to the individual but do not dictate the choices he will make among those options. The patterns of choice will be dicatated by his personality; insofar as his patterns are shared with others in the same institutional environment, they may act as a pressure for normative change." (Ibid.). Thus, behavior which can be observed is equally as important as belief passed through tradition, initiation and convention.

The society's concept of what constitutes an institution will have previously set limits for understanding conflict within the institution. Social structure consists of roles with ". . . normative prescriptions and proscriptions enforced by positive and negative sanctions." (Le Vine, op. cit., p.88). Reward and punishment is doled out according to conformity or

the lack of it. These ideas are correct, but do not totally account for social behavior. Institutions are like the tips of icebergs, says Le Vine. Most of what goes on is never visible to the public. Educators are fairly knowledgeable about that fact. Many believe that the higher the power/ authority the less one sees of the actual decision-making process. Even at "open" public board meetings, much of what is decided or voted upon has in fact been discussed and concensus reached before the meeting. School superintendents call "briefing" meetings where often decisions are made prior to the announced meetings. Here decisions are made by the board and the superintendet's "chosen few."

Conflict results when the gap between public expectations and school board behavior widens too far for any myth or explanation to explain it. Conformity-deviance divides by degrees in which everyday choices may be recognized. Since commitment and the sense of one's self (alone and as part of a group) are tied to the normative structure, choice becomes an inescapable part of behavior. This behavior may be categorized according to at least six levels of normative proscription or prescription.

Le Vine points out that given a six point scale a particular action is ". . . neither normative or deviant." (Ibid.). Such categories are usually not completely discrete. The myth of discrete categories clouds the researcher's mind as well as the public view of groups, such as school boards. Conflict can often occur because one supposes decisions are made by "virtu sola" as opposed to "in context."

Deviance from norms occurs as: (a) an expectation of norms, (b) opposition to norms, (c) a breakdown of norms. School board members show deviance along this continuum, and conflict may arise when: (a) the board al-

lows the superintendent to introduce all new policy, (b) when one or more members of the board refuse to vote unanimously on certain policy matters at a public meeting, and/or (c) a totally open public board meeting exists where all public criticism is allowed to be heard.

Conflict and subsequent change are necessary features of any adaptive group. Any group must be able to adapt or else it risks extinction. Mankind survived and evolved, socially and genetically in groups; adaptation being necessary to survival. Groups, institutions and cultures require social adaptation through resolution of conflict and change. Le Vine suggests four basic models of change: (a) Persistance, (b) Breakdown, (c) Progress, and (d) Revitilization.

The Persistence Model shows that the ". . . socio-cultural institutions of a people can change without a drastic alteration of their personalities or of the proximal environment of values (Le Vine, op. cit., p.93). The models for Breakdown suggest that social disintegration is linked with psychological disorder. Normlessness is the hallmark of breakdown. In the Progress model, "The concepts of acculturation, modernization, and achievement entail a model of persons as acquiring new forms of competence appropriate to innovations in their socio-cultural environments." (Ibid., p.94). The fourth model, that of Revitilization, suggests another interesting model of conflict and culture change similar to the cargo-cult revisited in psycho-social terms of adaptation. Basically if a socio-cultural system is disrupted by external or internal forces, its participants will be unable to meet the demands of the culture and disorderliness and disillusionment will result. As discontent rises, various disorders will be discernible, personal and social. Convention will probably be flaunted. "Then a prophet

who has undergone an altered state of consciousness in which he has been able to devise a new synthesis of ideas drawn from the traditional ideological resources of the culture, proposes this as a new and more satisfying code of values." The code may emphasize catharsis (release) or control (discipline) but will contrast sharply with the existing and unsatisfactory system (Le Vine, op. cit., p. 94). While this may sound like a rambling from Castenada's Journey to Ixtlan (1974) or an accurate description from the messianic movement in literature, it also (amazingly) resembles school boards, the personal rise to power and group power struggles. Every incumbent speaks of stability, control and/or discipline as the situation demands. Every insurgent speaks of conflict and change.

Cultures maintain themselves through two basic adaptive processes: stability and change. Each episode of the stability-change process has a consequent set of behaviors that are periodically used to carry out the process.

The three major types of psycho-social adaptations, or bases for conformity to cultural norms, says Le Vine (op. cit., p. 138) are: (a) willing conformity, (b) coerced conformity with motivational displacements, and (c) normative pluralism. The behaviors for change are either institutionally or personality induced. Those which are institutionally induced are: (1) changes in the context of normative demands for role performance or in the enforcement of such demands, (2) changes in the opportunity structure, and (3) changes in the scope and complexity of selective environments. Personality induced changes include: (1) cultural drift, (2) organizational competition and selection, (3) successful innovation within the existing opportunity structure (Le Vine, op. cit., pp. 153-155). Although the above

is Le Vine's model, it can be successfully transferred to any cultural subgroup; school boards included. Models of school board behavior such as the Iannoccone-Lutz (1970) model proposed in this book can be usefully viewed in this context.

Summary

This paper has emphasized overall models of social theories on cultural conflict, change and deviance. The fact that school boards fit many of the propositions should serve to reinforce the transferability of ideas and models and demonstrate that school boards can be studied and examined within generalized models of culture.

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